

NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES  
OFFICE OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY



Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with Leesa Jones  
SHE.OH.017  
January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020

### **Interview Information:**

Interviewer: Ellen Brooks

Interview Location: Washington, North Carolina

Interview Runtime: 01:20:40

Transcribed By: Abigail Thompson, March 2020

Reviewed By: Ellen Brooks, April 2020

Summary By: Abigail Thompson, March 2020

Collection: “She Changed the World” Oral History Project

### **Interview Summary:**

This oral history interview with Leesa Jones covers her general life history with a focus on her career in early childhood education, research, and development of the Washington Waterfront Underground Railroad Museum. Over the course of her career, Jones held positions at various Quaker and Montessori schools in New York City, Philadelphia, New Jersey, and North Carolina. In 2009, working with her husband and sister, Jones began leading African American history walking tours in Washington, North Carolina, and opened the Washington Waterfront Underground Railroad Museum in 2016.

Jones was born and raised in Washington, North Carolina. In the interview, she describes her childhood and experience growing up in a segregated town. She attended the City University of New York intending to pursue a career in social work, but soon found that she was better suited to work as a teacher. She later attended Philadelphia Community College to earn a degree in education. Jones also describes her involvement in her churches and the Alliance of Black Social Workers.

Jones describes moving from New York to Philadelphia, raising her two daughters with the help of extended family, and reconnecting with, Milton Jones, a childhood friend who would become her husband and partner in educational initiatives. After living in Burlington, New Jersey for several years, sending her daughters to college, and becoming an ordained minister, Jones and her husband returned to North Carolina. She describes their full-time efforts to research and tell the stories of the African American people who lived in or passed through Washington from the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Jones also describes the changes she has observed in Washington and retells the role the coastal town played in helping freedom-seekers to safety.

Jones discusses the details of curating and operating the museum and the importance of helping audiences know and appreciate their personal history and overlooked historical narratives. She also shares about her grandsons, and her work to write a children’s book on Washington’s African American history. Jones explains her thoughts on women in leadership in North Carolina, challenges she has faced as a woman, and shares her hopes for generations of women coming behind.

### **Biographical Sketch:**

Leesa Jones (nee Bailey) was born on August 13<sup>th</sup>, 1951 in Washington, North Carolina. She has two older sisters, a twin sister named Lena, and a younger sister. She attended the Washington Colored School, including P.S. Jones High School, and transferred to Washington High School in 1969. She graduated from the City University of New York and began a career in social work before switching to early childhood education. Jones taught preschool for thirty-two years in New York, Philadelphia, New Jersey, and North Carolina. She has two daughters from a previous marriage, Sandra and Terri, three grandchildren, and is married to Milton Jones, also of Washington. In 2012, she moved back to North Carolina and began to focus on educational initiatives focused on local African American history, including walking tours, books, and a museum about the Underground Railroad in Washington. The museum opened in 2016, and Jones has served as executive director ever since.

**Archivist's Note:**

Transcriptions reflect the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. Transcripts may not have been transcribed from the original recording medium. It is strongly suggested that researchers engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript. Timestamps are approximate.

Disclaimer: The narrator refers to a racially insensitive word when describing her experiences as a young Black girl learning about her race and what it meant in the context of society. The word is referred to but not spelled out in this transcript. The word in it's entirety can be heard in the sound recording of the interview.

## **Interview Transcript:**

Brooks: Today is January 7, 2020. This is an interview with Leesa Jones, who has taught in early childhood education for thirty-two years and is the founder and executive director of the Washington Waterfront Underground Railroad Museum. This interview is being conducted for the North Carolina State Archives She Changed the World Oral History Project and the interviewer is Ellen Brooks.

So, we're just gonna start at the beginning: you can tell me where and when you were born.

Jones: I was born here in Washington, August 13th, 1951. Washington born, raised, and educated. So, I am a very integral part of this city, and the city is also in me.

Brooks: So, tell me a little bit about what type of child you were.

Jones: Very curious—growing up I was one of those kids in school—when the teacher would ask a question I wasn't satisfied with the face of the answer. I always wanted to know how it worked, why it worked. And I think I was one of those students that drove the teachers nuts because I always had this, I need to know why that happened—and not just, it happened, but why? Who was involved? And so, I think that's one of the things that has shaped my love for research.

Brooks: Mm-hm—did you like school?

Jones: Oh, my favorite subjects—which were history, um, civics, English.

Brooks: And what did your parents do for a living?

Jones: My mother worked intermittently. Sometimes she would work at school, in the cafeteria, but she mostly stayed at home raising the three daughters that she had at home, my twin sister and my older sister. And my father owned a store here in Washington.

Brooks: What type of store?

Jones: It was a pool room in the back—it was sorta like a recreation center. But in the front of it you could buy cold drinks. The standard fare of the neighborhood stores back then—we used to call them “Nabs.” They were little, like, peanut butter crackers, chips, things that people would buy with discretionary cash that they had. Wasn't like a grocery store but you went in there—we used to call it Snacks and Treats.

Brooks: Mm-hm [laughs].

Jones: But they were very—a candy store—they were very important parts of the community.

Brooks: And tell me a little bit about what you did while you were growing up besides school—outside of school.

Jones: Um, I was involved in, like, the library club; always, um, interested in things that would enhance my desire to know how things work and why they work. So, I spent a lot of time in the library—um, Girl Scouts, the normal events of high school, civics club, those kinds of things.

Brooks: Did you have a favorite type of activity?

Jones: My favorite activity probably would have been, um, being in plays at school.

Brooks: Any memorable roles that you played?

Jones: [Laughs] I think it's the born actress in me that somehow got—but I always liked those roles where I could be, like, out front. And I—even if I just had one line, I would always develop it. I couldn't just say, "Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou, Romeo?" It had to be "Romeo, Romeo, wherefore—" these big swooping sweeps of my arms. [Brooks laughs] Anything that would distinguish me from the person standing next to me with the line. So, those were my favorite things to do.

Brooks: A little drama—

Jones: Actually, yeah absolutely.

Brooks: —little flair, drama. And when did you get your first job?

Jones: My first job was a babysitting job. One of the teachers at school—I volunteered to clean the cafeteria tables during summer school. She saw I was a really diligent worker and I paid great detail to what I did. So, she asked me, Would I be interested in babysitting her twin daughters who, at the time was about two. Now, we didn't have air conditioning in my house; we just had the window fans. But she had air conditioning in her house, color TV, and so of course I wanted that job. And so, I got a job—and again, I just had to make sure the children were entertained; played little games with them, sang with them, made sure they ate their lunch and they napped. Well, that was the whole job. However; um, my friends that were working in tobacco, which—you'd go in the tobacco fields and some people would, um, tie the tobacco, or—most of the younger girls my age had a job breaking the flower off of the—it was called sucking tobacco. You'd break the flower off so that it didn't take energy away from the plant.

[00:04:57]

I was making ten dollars a week, and they were making thirty and thirty-five dollars a week. And so, I came home one Friday with my ten dollars and they

came home with their thirty-five dollars and I told my mom, "I wanna do what they do." My mom goes, "Lee, you don't want to do that. It's working in a field, it's hot work, it's hard work—", "Yes I do, yes I do, yes I do." So, she told me to let the teacher know in enough time so she could get someone else to work. Well, the first time the tobacco truck rolled around four o'clock in the morning I was so excited to be on that truck with my friends. We got there, it was—the sun hadn't come up yet—it was nice and cool. And so, my job, again, was to break the top of the plant off—the flowering part—that's all I had to do. Which was fine until about nine thirty, ten o'clock when the sun came up. It was blazing hot; I've never been that hot in my life. And I figured, I can't do this for the rest of the day. And so, I told the man who owned the field, "I can't do this." He says, "Well I can't take you back home now, you're gonna have to wait for everybody else." So, what went from the best job in my life as a young person to the worst job in my life as a person, it still has left an indelible mark. So, my first job was a really good one, I just didn't know it.

[Both laugh]

Brooks: Well I think that's fair; all of your friends are coming home with more money, so—

Jones: Yeah, but—

Brooks: Did they tell you, like, how hard it was or did they tell you that, No, no keep your babysitting job?

Jones: No, they just made it, like, the most fun event ever because—I mean they got a chance to, um, share with each other and tell jokes and stories and sing and it just sounded like a wonderful opportunity. However, for me it turned out to be something awful. I had an allergy that lasted two—my eyes were swollen shut because of the, um, allergen from the tobacco and dust and nobody ever told me they were hazards of the job [laughs]. So I remember that job to this day.

Brooks: And how old were you when that happened?

Jones: I think I was eleven—

Brooks: Okay.

Jones: —I think—yep, fifth grade I was eleven.

Brooks: Okay. And did you manage to get your babysitting job back?

Jones: No.

Brooks: Oh. [laughs]

Jones: That wonderful job was gone forever.

Brooks: Oh no. Um, and I think on your form you mentioned you went to the Washington Colored School, so is that a segregated school?

Jones: Yes, all the schools here in Washington were segregated until 1968.

Brooks: Mm-hm.

Jones: And I went to, um, the colored school, I went to the colored high school. And in 1968 when they desegregated schools, nobody wanted to leave their school. So, what they did—they used the lottery system, and if they called the name—the number that was next to your name—the students from P.S. Jones High School, which was the high school I was attending, had to go over to Washington High, and the students from Washington High whose names were called, they had to go to P.S. Jones. So, I did not have to go that first year, but my twin sister did.

Brooks: Oh, wow.

Jones: And so, I think it was about thirty students that went. Um, nobody really wanted to be there. And, of course, the students that came from Washington High to P.S. Jones—nobody wanted to be there. But in 1969 everybody in P.S. Jones High School went over to Washington High.

Brooks: So, it just became one, so P.S. Jones—

Jones: Yes.

Brooks: —wasn't a school anymore?

Jones: It was; it still maintained its name as a school. However, now it became a junior high. So instead of Washington High—the students—they came over here and any grades below that—everybody changed schools.

Brooks: Okay, okay. And once you were with the bigger group of students how did you take that? How—

Jones: I absolutely loved Washington High. Um, at P.S. Jones we did not always have the newest books, even to magazines and so when I got to Washington High I literally felt like I had gone to college. All new materials, anything that you—because I would have to come here to the Brown Library to use the encyclopedia. Which, now when you say "encyclopedia" to kids they have no idea—you just Google everything or use the internet. But because the colored library and the library at the colored school did not always have the most updated materials,

when I got to Washington High and had access to those things, absolutely loved it.

Brooks: Wow. What was, um, can you give me an idea of the demographics in terms of white and black folks? Like, percentage-wise?

Jones: I honestly don't remember now.

[00:10:00]

Brooks: Okay, when you were growing up—it sounds like it might have been almost half and half. I guess I'm wondering kind of, like, as a kid, how—what—did you feel any impact from being segregated? Did you feel—or was there enough people like you that, you know, that you kind of just felt like—

Jones: You mean in the neighborhood or in the school itself?

Brooks: Um, I guess in the neighborhood.

Jones: I grew up on 4th Street. And the um, [laughs] we actually say the color dividing line was 3rd Street.

Brooks: Okay.

Jones: There were still white families in our neighborhood; we all played together. My first introduction into learning that I, um, was a person other than everybody else—I think I was four, I hadn't started first grade yet—and there was a man that lived around the corner from our house, Mr. Ecklin [sp?]. Now he had a grocery store, it was not just a candy store, it was a full-fledged grocery store. And he had these two children, John and Mary, who came in our backyard every single day to play with us. And, um, I remember one day they came to our house and Mary was—she was really upset about something and she was crying. And we tried to get out of her why she was crying. And her brother—Mary was five at the time and her brother, John, was seven—and John was saying, "Well, you're gonna have to tell them." And Mary, I mean, she was distraught. I honestly thought somebody had died in her family. So, she said to us, "Lee"—which, people call me Lee and my twin sister was Lena—"we can't play with y'all no more." And I asked "why can't you play with us anymore?" She says, "Because you're [the *n* word] and Papa says we can't play with [the *n* word]." And she just broke down sobbing, and so her brother said, "Come on, Mary, we have to go back now." And I was like, Wow. I thought maybe we had chicken pox. I did not know that term, and I thought it meant, like, we had chicken pox or something.

So, I remember going in the backyard and asked my grandmother who was hanging out clothes, and I said "Granny, what's [the *n* word]?" And she said, "Who said that to you?" I said, "Well, John and Mary says they can't play with us



anymore because we're [the *n* word]." And she said, "Well just don't play with them anymore." But I thought it was, like, chicken pox or measles. I did not know.

And so, later on that summer I heard these two men that had been drinking, and they were passing our house, and one called the other a [*n* word]. And that's when it dawned on me, Maybe that's something bad. And then, of course, in the course of going to school I found out what the term meant. But up until then everybody played with everybody. I remember playing with Mary about a year earlier and the only difference I knew between me and Mary is that when I jumped rope my two braids on the side of my head didn't flap up and down but when Mary did, hers did. But other than that, that's the kind of community we grew up in. There were many, many kind white families there that treated everybody the same, the same thing with the black families. So, it wasn't until I got maybe in the elementary school, I would say, that we start noticing differences.

Brooks: And did you talk to your parents about that at all?

Jones: They'd say things like, um, When you go downtown, just do what you're supposed to do. For example, we knew you could go in Woolworth. You could get a soda from the counter, where, you know, lunches were being served, but you could not sit down and eat the sandwich or drink the soda. So, that was understood. The Turnage Theater—you had to go through the back door, up a flight of steps and sit in the balcony. That was just life then, and so you just did what you were told. If you went into, like, the McLellan's Department Store or the Woolworth, there was a fountain that said, White, there was a fountain that said Colored, and you knew to drink from that fountain. So, that was just how life was and your parents would always tell you, Just do what you're supposed to do. And the understanding was, Don't make trouble.

Brooks: And how did you feel about that?

Jones: At the time that was par for the course. That was just how it was.

Brooks: So, at what point—maybe in high school or even before that—did you have an inkling of what you wanted to be when you grew up?

[00:15:02]

Jones: I wanted to be a social worker at first. Um, there were a lot of things I saw families go through and children go through. I remember classmates that did not excel well in school, or had a hard time in school. But it wasn't because they weren't brilliant students, it's because they had problems at home, different things. And so, I wanted to become a social worker so that I could help, specifically, children get a good start in life. That was my first goal.

The first few years I did social work or—like, when you're doing um, interning—they sent me to a family that had the children taken away from them because they had been abusing their children. And it became increasingly difficult to want to do that line of work because I'd see a four-month-old that had its mouth wired where the parent in anger had kinda thrown it against a wall or something. And so, working with a lot of those children, it began to break my heart. And one of the things I had to do was sub in a classroom for six months, at a local school. And I saw that I would probably be a better fit as a teacher than a social worker, because I'd come home with my heart broken every day. And I kinda figured if I worked in a classroom maybe I could make a significant impact on the children as well. So, I decided to become a teacher.

Brooks: Okay. So, when you wanted to pursue social work, did you go to school for that?

Jones: Yes, I—um, the City University of New York—yes.

Brooks: In New York, right? How did you make the decision to go there?

Jones: Well, I did not want to go to school in North Carolina [Brooks laughs]. All of my friends were going to school in North Carolina. And me, always wanting to try or do something different, this adventurous streak in me had me looking at schools in New York. Had never been to New York in my life, as further north as I've ever been or lived was Philadelphia. But I just figured New York would be a good fit for me. Crazy decision, but I ended up actually doing well there.

Brooks: Yeah. Where did you live in New York?

Jones: When I first moved to New York I moved to Manhattan. Stayed in Manhattan about eleven months, then I moved to the Bronx.

Brooks: Okay, great. So how was that? I mean, like, just getting out of North Carolina and being around all new people. What was that experience like?

Jones: Total culture shock.

Brooks: Yeah.

Jones: I knew that I would be around new people, what I was not prepared for is the vast difference in peoples' um, behaviors. For example, here in the South, if I passed your house ten times a day and there were older people on the porch—maybe your mom, your grandmom—I would have to speak every time I passed your house. "Good morning, Miss So and So, good afternoon—" and as a kid I thought it was totally crazy but that's what you did. When I got to New York, uh, people had to literally tell me, "You can't do that here." Cause, I mean, I just passed strangers in the morning, Good morning, have a good day, good morning. And um, [laughs] it was not greeted with a Good morning back. I would walk into the

classroom and say, Good morning to everybody and it was not always met with a Good morning. Same thing with the office. And so, those kind of things—it had an impact on me because I couldn't—"good morning" is a gift, or a smile is a gift that you give to people. That's what we're taught here in Washington in the South. You respect people. You respect their dignity and simply by saying, "Good morning" or "Good evening" is a way of respecting another person's humanity. When I got to New York and didn't always get that back it was different for me.

Brooks: Mm-hm. How long were you in New York?

Jones: Um, I was in New York for, um, eleven years—

Brooks: Wow.

Jones: —and then I moved to Philadelphia.

Brooks: Okay. So, eleven years—you weren't studying that whole time, were you? Or were you?

Jones: No.

Brooks: Okay. So, you did the internship and then you were in the classroom and then you decided social work was not for you—

Jones: Yes.

Brooks: —um, and then you started teaching. What did you teach?

Jones: Preschool; I loved preschoolers. *Loved* preschoolers, because at first, in the internship I had was working at a daycare center—well, yeah, working at a daycare center. And just being around the children that innocent, um, the excitement of learning something new—that was just so great and I go, That's what I wanna do.

[00:20:00]

Brooks: And so, did you do most of your work in the Bronx while you were in New York?

Jones: Yes.

Brooks: Okay, that's great. Um, anything else about that time period that you feel like was significant, wanna mention?

Jones: It was a time of, um, actually becoming the person that I am now—understanding people. I think the greatest takeaway from all of that was learning to understand people; understanding that the reasons that people do things the way they do is

because something has impacted them to act the way they do. And so, living around so many different kinds of people—I mean every nationality you could pretty much name, I encountered, I engaged with when I was living in New York. And just seeing how other people lived was fascinating.

Brooks: And were you involved with any, like—I guess you wouldn't call them extra-curriculars or—what did you—what kind of hobbies and groups did you get into there?

Jones: The one that I remember the most significantly—I had joined Marble Collegiate Church—that was Dr. Norman Vincent Peale's church—and one of the things I was interested in is working on a hotline. And the hotline—people could call in for any reason. Um, sometimes it was suicide, sometimes it was depression, sometimes, "I'm new in the city, I don't know where to go, I don't know what to do." And it was a great education because it taught us how to listen to people's hearts when they talked. You didn't always have to have an answer, but you needed to let the person talk. And then, if they needed specific things, or we could bring in another counselor, or we had a guide book that could guide them into things—that was really life-changing for me because I learned to listen to the words behind the words. I learned to listen to people's hearts when they talked, and I learned to respect the place that they were in, knowing that sometimes you can't help people but you can listen to them. So, um, that was, I think, one of the most significant things that I was involved in, that I still carry with me to this day.

Brooks: Do you know if that hotline is still up and running?

Jones: I'm sure it is, Norman—um, Marble Collegiate Church is a huge church in downtown Manhattan, so I'm sure it is.

Brooks: So, what was behind the decision to leave New York?

Jones: I left New York [laughs]—my marriage disintegrated. My husband, who was a very—he's a nice guy, but he just left me for another woman. And so, um, I did not wanna raise my two young daughters in a situation where, um, it was very difficult to be kind to a person that had betrayed you. And so, I moved to Philadelphia simply because I wanted to get my children away from an atmosphere of, um, I really am not happy right now, but those are not the kind words I was using at the time. So, I moved to Philadelphia with my daughters.

Brooks: Okay. Was there any reason that Philadelphia was the choice or was that just the easiest move?

Jones: Well, that was my mother's—all of her siblings, my mother was the only one of six children that remained in the South. All of her brothers and sisters moved to Philadelphia for better work opportunities—the Naval Yard, you know, those kinds of things. And so, we would go to Philadelphia every summer. And so, I

knew Philadelphia well, loved the culture there, I loved the history there. So, I had a connection with Philadelphia so that's why I went.

Brooks: Yeah. And when were your daughters born?

Jones: Um, Sonja was born 1969.

Brooks: And your other daughter?

Jones: 1971.

Brooks: Okay. Just helps for a little context.

Jones: Yes.

Brooks: And when did you move to Philly?

Jones: Moved to Philadelphia 1982, I believe.

Brooks: And what did you do there?

Jones: In Philadelphia—that's when I got a job interning with the Alliance of Black Social Workers. Again, I thought maybe I wanted to go back because what I had to do with this job was just interview families. There was no visiting homes of children that had been abused. One of the things the Alliance of Black Social Workers wanted to do before they would place the child back in the home—they needed to know if the parent or parents had been to the classes that they were supposed to attend, got the counseling that they were supposed to attend. And one of the things we knew when we would call them to the office—they always gave patent answers.

[00:25:00]

So, they came up with a plan to tell people—in other words, We really know we—we really need to know how you're doing. We're just gonna go a roundabout way of asking you how you're doing. So, what they did was they told the parents that would be involved in these interviews that the Alliance of Black Social Workers were developing a handbook. And what they needed to do was interview families all over Philadelphia because they said different families raise their children differently. And we want to talk to you, and we will pay you twenty dollars to participate in this interview. So, all I had to do was go to the person's home, ask the questions that were on the paper. Now they didn't know I knew their children had been taken away from them, and they didn't know that I was trained to look beyond the answers that they gave me. So, I would write down what they said and then I'd take it back to the social workers and they were able to extract from those answers if the parents had really been taking their classes, if they really had stayed well into counseling, and if they were now well able to

have those children come back in the home. That, again, was a very fascinating time for me. Again, I learned to listen to people talk.

Brooks: Yeah. And did that change your mind at all about what you wanted to do career-wise?

Jones: No, because when it came to the point where now we're going to go back—dealing with the children that had been abused I knew I could not do that. And so, I stayed with the school system.

Brooks: Okay. And it says on your sheet that you went to Philadelphia Community College?

Jones: Yes.

Brooks: So, what degree were you working towards there?

Jones: I was working on a, um, education degree.

Brooks: And, uh, did you—well, were you working in the school system while you were also at school?

Jones: Yes, yes.

Brooks: And parenting?

Jones: Yes.

Brooks: How was—how did that go [laughs]?

Jones: I had a big support group. I had three sisters in Philadelphia at the time and we were really close. I had aunts there as well. So, I had a really great system to help with the parenting. I ended up actually going to classes to learn how to deal with my feelings about someone having abandoned me and my children. And so, I needed that—that emotional support, I couldn't get from my sisters because they were all, Eh, let him go [laughs]. But I needed to talk to people professionally about how well to handle that and the steps I needed to take to make myself hold [whole ??]. But I had a great support system with my sisters.

Brooks: So, you said—so you have three sisters?

Jones: Three sisters that were living in Philadelphia at the time—

Brooks: Okay.

Jones: —my twin sister remained here in North Carolina.

Brooks: Okay, so you have an older sister, your twin, and then a younger?

Jones: Mm-hm, I have two older sisters—

Brooks: Oh, okay.

Jones: —my twin, and then a younger sister.

Brooks: Okay. All girls?

Jones: All girls.

Brooks: Great. And how was the transition to Philadelphia for your kids?

Jones: They loved it, they loved it. Again, they had cousins to play with in Philadelphia, they had places that they could go. In the Bronx, everywhere they went I had to take them. We had a huge house and a huge yard which was fenced in, but they did not have the liberty, like, to ride bikes down the street; in Philadelphia, they did. They had cousins that took them all over, to different kinds of events. They absolutely loved it.

Brooks: And how long were you in Philadelphia?

Jones: I was in Philadelphia, um, eleven years? Let's see, '82 to—no, fifteen years.

Brooks: Wow.

Jones: Yeah.

Brooks: Okay, anything else about your time there? Were you mostly teaching?

Jones: Yes.

Brooks: And were you mostly teaching preschool still? Or—

Jones: Yes, yes.

Brooks: —okay, great. Um, yeah. Were you—what type of school system were you in?

Jones: Quaker school system.

Brooks: Okay.

Jones: Um, my first job was at a Montessori school—absolutely loved Montessori. And then I joined onto a Quaker school, which was where I predominantly taught at and enjoyed that as well.

Brooks: Is there a difference that you could point to between Quaker school and, like, your typical public school or private school?

Jones: Um, the Quaker schools seem to be a little more laid back, mainly because people were paying copious amounts of tuition. So, the children had broad experiences.

[00:29:55]

So, if we were talking about, um—like, I would teach them to speak different languages; just how to say, Please, Thank you, and I love you in Japanese, for example. Some of them had actually been to Japan, and most of these children had been exposed to a lot more things than kids in a public school would have been exposed to: good literature, good music. And so, it was just a joy teaching at that school. The school also had abundant funds for whatever you needed, whereas in public school, teachers would actually take their own money to buy things for their classroom. And I enjoyed, um, the things that the parents as well brought to the educational process.

Brooks: Yeah, that's great. Sounds like you had a good community there to work with.

Jones: We did, absolutely.

Brooks: And were you co-teaching or were you the only teacher in a classroom?

Jones: I was a supervising teacher; I had two teachers under me.

Brooks: Oh, great, wow. And about how many students did you usually have?

Jones: Um, anywhere from fifteen to twenty, cause the classrooms were markedly small as opposed to a public school, which could have thirty students in them.

Brooks: Yeah, anything else about your time in Philadelphia was significant?

Jones: Just opportunities for all kinds of wonderful cultural events. Philadelphia is steeped in history, so I was right at home with that.

Brooks: And so, obviously, you've kind of pursued your love of history and your curiosity. What shape did that take while you were in Philadelphia?

Jones: It gave credence to the old stories that I grew up hearing. Um, there were so many places about the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia that tied into stories that I'd always heard here growing up. And as a child growing up they were just old



stories, but then when I get to Philadelphia and I could actually go into the house where Dr. William Still lived it made an indelible mark on my mind and just increased my love for history all the more.

Brooks: So, what was after Philadelphia?

Jones: Burlington, New Jersey.

Brooks: Oh! Okay [laughs].

Jones: Got to Burlington because um, when my daughters had graduated from Temple University I had said to myself, "I am going back to North Carolina to live." And so, a person that, um, had been a childhood friend of mine—we were dating off and on, and I just decided, "I am never gonna get married again." But the guy that I was dating, he was just so wonderful. And so, I was talking to him one night about going back to North Carolina and I said, "In September I'm going to move back to Washington." And he goes, "I was just getting ready to ask you to marry me." I go, "I can change my mind."

Brooks: [laughs]

Jones: So, I end up living in Burlington, New Jersey, um, from 1996 until 2012.

Brooks: Okay, and I'm assuming he was based in New Jersey? That's why—

Jones: Yeah, he was living in New Jersey.

Brooks: —okay. And what was, what did he do for a living?

Jones: He was a forklift driver at a major company.

Brooks: What did you think of Burlington?

Jones: Loved Burlington. Again, steeped in history, huge place to learn about the Underground Railroad. I loved Burlington; the town was laid out almost just like Washington, but it was still in the North, and I still needed to ride eight hours to get to Washington, North Carolina. But I liked—I really liked Burlington, but not enough to want to be there for the rest of my life.

Brooks: And did you find a job relatively easily there?

Jones: Absolutely, yes. Again, in private schools.

Brooks: Yeah, and still preschool?

Jones: Yes.

Brooks: So, you just kind of kept your love for those small ones—

Jones: Yes, abs—yes.

Brooks: —the ones, the very innocent, naive ones of the—that could learn all the things?

Jones: Who—well, whose outlook on the world was so unscathed by adulting.

Brooks: Yeah, yeah, they have so much to learn. Um, okay anything else about New Jersey that was significant?

Jones: Well, I became an ordained minister while I was living in New Jersey.

Brooks: That's great.

Jones: And that was significant because the church I was with, we helped build churches and orphanages in Hyderabad, India and Prajatna Putnam [??] and so that remains one of the most significant works I did in New Jersey.

Brooks: How did you decide that you wanted to be ordained?

Jones: Actually, [laughs] I did not quite decide. It was the work that I was doing with homeless.

[00:34:56]

And my pastor saw the compassion and love that I had for reaching out to the hurting, the helpless, the hopeless, and made me a minister in the church. And then a couple of years later he ordained me to ministry. So, that way I could actually perform weddings and funerals.

Brooks: And then during this time while you were in New Jersey, did both of your daughters graduated from Temple?

Jones: One graduated from Temple and one graduated from Cheyney State University.

Brooks: Okay, and then where did they end up after?

Jones: Sonja ended up leaving Temple and going into broadcast journalism. She got a job at WOR Radio and she remains in broadcast journalism to this day. My younger daughter, Terri—a whiz at math and science—she got a job working with Cisco, the computer company and she remained with Cisco for about twenty-three years until her death in 2017.

Brooks: I'm sorry. Is Sonja—where is Sonja now?

Jones: She still lives in New York.

Brooks: Still lives in New York, that's great. So, do you visit?

Jones: She was just here—

Brooks: Oh, great!

Jones: —um, she's here at least five or six times during the year and then we go up and visit as well.

Brooks: That's great. So, you—after you leave New Jersey, what was behind the decision to leave?

Jones: I knew in 2012 that that was going to be my last year teaching. I worked at a private school but the dynamics of teaching were, um, becoming increasingly difficult. For example, our directors had a meeting with us, and they said that they were going to use another strategy toward discipline. And, for example, you could not use any negatives toward the child, you could not use the word no. And I was constantly trying to think, How do I tell this child, “don't run.” You could not use the word, don't. You had to suggest in a way, You would be safer if you walked. Um, that was very taxing, very, very taxing. The parents were becoming younger and younger, and the children were becoming more undisciplined. And when I say undisciplined, um—for example, a child could walk in and the mother could be on the cell phone and the child wanted the cell phone to play a game with, and if the mother did not give the child the cell phone the child is just, like, hitting the parent. And that would somehow translate over into how you treated every adult, meaning your teacher. So, I had children that wanted to throw chairs at me, I had children that wanted to throw toys at me. And based on the strategy that we were using it just became extremely difficult. And so, I decided in 2012, This will be my last year.

And so, in October of that year my husband and I—that was the same year Hurricane Sandy hit. We were not involved because we were about sixty miles away from the ocean, but there were so many communities that were impacted. We just decided to sell our condo and move South. Not that the hurricane had anything to do with it, but we just decided it's just time to move on and this would be a good time. So, we packed up our things and we came South.

Brooks: And how did your husband feel about making that move?

Jones: He was ready. He was ready as well.

Brooks: Had he been to the South before?

Jones: Actually, he's Washington born and raised.

Brooks: Oh, okay. Wow, alright.

Jones: Mm-hm. Actually born and raised. We've been great friends ever since maybe the seventh or eighth grade.

Brooks: Oh, wow.

Jones: I was the class clown. Instead of doing my work I'm just joking around and then when it's time to pass up your algebra paper and I notice all these blank spaces I'd go, "Milton, what do you have for answer eight?" Write it down. "What do you have for answer nine?" So, we've been great friends ever since junior high.

Brooks: Oh, wow. And his name is Isaac?

Jones: No—

Brooks: Oh, no that's your dad's, sorry.

Jones: Mm-hm, Milton Jones.

Brooks: Milton Jones, gotcha, sorry. Um, wow, that's great! So, you both decided together to come back to where you grew up.

Jones: Yes, yes.

Brooks: How was it different and how was it the same?

Jones: In terms of moving back to Washington?

Brooks: Mm-hm.

Jones: The town had undergone so many changes. There was renewal all over the place. Many of the neighborhoods that existed when we left—and even coming back sporadically over the years—those neighborhoods were gone.

[00:39:54]

And in its place, you had brand new houses and you had a well-defined waterfront and the businesses downtown were coming back because—we used to have a mall here, and so I guess the way it went with malls all over America. The malls would take the traffic from downtown and then the downtowns ended up economically stressed. And so, by the time we moved back in 2012 the mall was gone and now the downtown was being revitalized. So, in many of the ways these—the geography had changed but the people hadn't.

Brooks: And did you still have family here when you moved back?

Jones: Yes.

Brooks: Both of you?

Jones: Yes.

Brooks: Wow. So, as we discussed before we started recording, I've never been to Washington before, this is my first time. Um, and I know that a lot of places are kind of known for something. Is there something, like an industry or something else that Washington's kind of known for?

Jones: Um, there were a lot of, um, industries that were here; factories that don't exist anymore. So, what you have in its place now are entrepreneurs who are coming back, buying these buildings, revitalizing these buildings, going, Oh, that would make a great Airbnb, that would make a great restaurant. So, we see a lot of that growth here now. History has always been a big draw here. We have an estuary here which is the second-largest in the United States. The waterfront always has been—people have sought it out. Um, the seafood industry remains strong. So, those are the kind of things that I've seen the most tremendous growth in since I've been here.

Brooks: And again—forgive me for not knowing, but maybe other folks wouldn't know either—what is this waterfront? Is it a coast or—

Jones: It's an estuary.

Brooks: Okay.

Jones: Where the river—we are, from where you're sitting right now, you're about maybe, um, I would say maybe ten hours by sailboat from the Atlantic Ocean.

Brooks: Okay.

Jones: This is fresh water. The Pamlico-Tar is fresh water, but you have the salty water coming in. And so, this water becomes brackish water which is great for your marine life. But you also get the experience—you see dolphins out there, many of the times. So, the Pamlico-Tar River, it's just a mainstay in eastern Carolina.

Brooks: Okay. I knew cove wasn't the right word, but estuary [laughs].

Jones: Yeah [inaudible] where the river meets the sea.

Brooks: Right, yes, I definitely learned that in grade school at some point [laughs]. Um, great. So, 2012 is when you moved back and were you—did you consider yourself retired at that time?

Jones: I worked for a preschool for about three months, and I go, I'm retired now.

Brooks: [laughs]

Jones: And so, I just went back to our history digging. When I did live in Burlington, New Jersey, we started a walking tour here in Washington: the Washington African American Walking History Tour. And what we would do, we'd take participants on the tour, we'd walk for about maybe eight blocks, and just tell them all the African American history here in Washington from about 1658 until about 1950. And so, we would do that periodically. We'd come down from New Jersey, we'd do these walking tours. So, once we moved back here in 2012 then we could give those tours their full attention.

Brooks: And when you say "we" was that—

Jones: My husband and I, yes.

Brooks: —you and your husband, okay. Were you working with other folks here while you were in New Jersey or was it just you and your husband?

Jones: It was just my husband, my sister, Lena, and myself. And we'd dress up as 18th century characters and we'd take you up and down the waterfront and tell you all the history that we wanted to share.

Brooks: And how—when did that get started?

Jones: It actually started in 2010.

Brooks: Okay. And where did you get most of your resources? Where did you learn most of your history from?

Jones: I'd say, um, 70% of it right here in this library, but I also go all over the state of North Carolina. University libraries: ECU [East Carolina University], Chapel Hill, Duke. But I also go all over country because you'd be amazed—I just came back from Seattle a couple months ago. Go to university libraries in Seattle and go in the private papers of people who have donated their families' archives. Be amazed at what I can find in Seattle, Santa Barbara, Nevada, about history right here in Washington.

[00:45:00]

So, I go all over, but I would say about 70% of it right here in the Brown Library. Um, talking to some of the older families that have been here a long time, like the Fowels, the Meyers, [sp ??] and so, I talk to anybody with a great story.

Brooks: Yeah. Yeah, that is something you mentioned on the form I asked you to fill out about how you kind of wanted to talk about advocating for collecting stories and recording history and some things. And so, can we talk a little bit more about that and why you think that's so important?

Jones: Again, I am Washington born and raised. There's an old African proverb that says, "Until the lion can talk you will always hear the hunter's version of what happened." And so, in schools, even if it was local history it was a very abbreviated history, and there was really no African American history that I was taught when I was in school. We'd have maybe eight chapters on the Civil War, maybe two paragraphs on slavery. Slaves worked in the fields, they sang all the time, and they were happy. Well, I can tell you that is not quite [laughs] the picture we wanna paint here. And so, um, what I learned in my research was all of the history that was here in Washington I never heard about. And I remember doing some research one time—'cause I was writing a book for my grandchildren—and I stumbled across all this African American history. Had never been taught about in Washington and I literally remember feeling like I'd been cheated. Like, where—it's been here all the time how come I didn't know?

And so, we started just digging in the oddest places. Or the stories that I heard growing up; now we could put the collaboration of other stories and histories with it. I'll give you for an example: again, very, very, loud child. I couldn't even say, "Ellen, I have two pieces of candy, would you like one?" and I'd literally, right in front of you—it came out 900 decibels louder, you could hear me in Raleigh. And my mother would say "Lee, if you don't stop that screaming you're gonna have to come up on the porch." Now on the porch is my grandmother and her friends—*these old people*—because you know when you're six anybody twenty is old. Now that I'm sixty-eight, sixty-eight is the new forty, I don't know what to tell you [Brooks laughs]. So, they're telling these stories that literally made no sense. And because I had to sit on the porch and my friends are playing—well, we didn't call it, "time out" back then, we called it "come up on this porch 'til you can learn to stop yelling." I had to make it sound like I was really interested in what was being said. And so, they'd be drinking iced tea out of these mayonnaise jars, fanning themselves, going, Well, you know, Bessie Kumba [sp ??] was a maroon. And I would look at them and think, Y'all straight up crazy, there are no maroon people. Because I was an advocate [avid ??] National Geographic Magazine reader's fan. Every month when they came out, I'd go to the library and I'd go through, page by page. And they had people of every color you could imagine, but there were no maroon people. I knew what maroon was because my sister went to high school and their colors were maroon and gold. So, I knew exactly what maroon looked like. And I'm thinking to myself, There are no maroon people. I went to Sunday school; the Sunday school song said, "Jesus loves the little children of the world, they're red, they're yellow, they're black, and they're white." And I figured if anybody was maroon, Jesus would know that and it would be in the song. So, I just remember saying, They don't have this right. They can't be right. There are no maroon people.

Lo and behold, maroons were simply slaves that went to live in swamps because in the swamps there's nobody coming in there to get you. Washington had a lot of cypress swamps. There were enslaved people here that actually made it to the Great Dismal Swamp. And in the swamp, you've got snakes, you've got animals, you've got reasons to not be there. Now, many of the people in Washington—I know from my family—came over from Guinea, West Africa. And a lot of people in Guinea had a genetic mutation toward sickle cell. Um, doesn't mean they got the full-blown sickle cell. It just meant they had that marker. And because they had that marker—that genetic mutation that caused sickle cell it also made them immune to yellow fever.

[00:50:01]

So, if you were in the swamps and you're being bitten by mosquitos that carry yellow fever or malaria you may have an immunity to that. Many of the Obeah men, or medicine men that came over from Guinea, they had poultices for snake bite and so that, if you were bitten by a poisonous snake it did not mean you necessarily had to die if you treated the puncture wound with these poultices. So, in the swamps you've got all kinds of poisonous snakes, but if you've got that poultice you may survive that. Also, cypress trees produce a tannin in the water. Like, many of the ships here in Washington, when they would trade with countries overseas—England, Belgium, Holland, Sweden, the West Indies, wherever they were going on those long voyages—they would often take casks of tannin water and they'd drink that water because it had a medicine-like quality to it. And so, if you were an enslaved person and you're hiding in the swamp, and you have those things that you can access—you have immunity to the yellow fever or malaria, you have poultices that you can treat snake bite with, you're drinking that tannin water—there's a good chance you can live there well. And so, when they were saying that Bessie Kumba [sp ??] was a maroon, they weren't referring to skin color, they were talking about an enslaved woman that successfully lived in the swamp. 'Cause the chances are somebody looking for them is not gonna go in there to get you.

So, I'd listen to those old stories and then later I was able to put the documentation with it. So, I guess being a loud kid really paid off.

Brooks: Yeah. And so, what are some of the thing you say to other folks to kind of try to encourage them to know their own history and preserve their own history?

Jones: It's so important to know your history. It's important for the sake of being able—because there are so many heroes in our families that would go unspoken and never talked about. And if you don't know your history or you don't know those people that went in to doing great things—and maybe great things was successfully being able to raise your family in a swamp, for example, or successfully being able to come up with communication codes that would help



you get off of a plantation, or many families today don't know that during the Civil War they had family members that were in college. And so, if you don't take the time to learn the stories, first of all, you're cheating yourself out of great legacies. But you're also—will not be able to pass on the things that are so vital, not only for your family but for the community to know.

Brooks: And so, before you started the museum—you started that in 2016?

Jones: Yes.

Brooks: Were you mostly doing the walking tour or were there other things you were doing between 2012 and 2016?

Jones: We were doing the walking tour but there were times when PBS would come over to film something that we were doing. There were times—people writing books that wanted to know about Washington history would come over and talk to us. So, we mainly focused on just finding out as much history as we can. That became our new job.

Brooks: Mm-hm. Did you have, um, like a company name or an LLC or anything like that?

Jones: No, just African American History Tours of Washington.

Brooks: Okay, and then people knew how to find you?

Jones: Well, we did this Facebook page. People that heard about what we were doing here, either through radio broadcasts or PBS or reading something in the paper, they asked, Would I make a website? Well, I have to tell you I'm incredibly cheap. I just don't spend money for anything, but Facebook was free.

Brooks: Right.

Jones: And so, when we shared this history that many of the families that had been here for generations had never heard, they'd go, Well, I'm from Washington, North Carolina and nobody ever told me that. So, we developed a Facebook page and it's called, "I'm from Washington, North Carolina and nobody told me this." And on that page, we chronicle history as far back as—I believe it's, um, 1680, I believe. And so, that became our work. We also were able to get the National Park Service to designate the Pamlico River as part of the National Park Service Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Site.

[00:54:55]

And right after that people started coming to Washington thinking that we had a site and we actually didn't, we just had the great stories and the marker. So, what

we did was we asked the city for an old caboose that sat here for many years. They let us use it and we turned it into a mini museum that would highlight the Washington Waterfront Underground Railroad and the history of the 143 plantations in the greater Washington area. And how people here, white, black, Native American—some prefer to be called First American—immigrant, how people worked together in the small, Confederate town in the South to help freedom-seekers get to their freedom. So, that's become our great body of work.

Brooks: And when you mentioned PBS, was that part of their genealogy show that they were doing?

Jones: No, um, "North Carolina Weekend."

Brooks: Oh, okay.

Jones: They've been here several times to chronicle the things that we do.

Brooks: Wow, that's great. And you said the train car is a caboose? Is that what you said?

Jones: Yes.

Brooks: So, the caboose isn't necessarily associated with the Railroad but it is a railroad car—[laughs]

Jones: No, and many people do. They think—oh, we've had so many people come in that museum, And this is the train they rode? And we have to explain to them: No, the Underground Railroad was not a train, it was just a network of all kinds of people helping people.

Brooks: Yeah.

Jones: But when they see the train, some actually assume—and one gentleman asked us, he said, "So this train ran under that river?" I said, "No, sir, no sir, no sir." But, um, it helps because it kind of cements the idea of a railroad and a network.

Brooks: Yeah, I like that. So, can you talk a little bit—I mean I'm sure we don't have time for you to tell me everything you know—but can you talk a little bit about how the Pamlico River played a role in the Underground Railroad and how Washington played a role?

Jones: From about 1790 when General George Washington declared the Port of Washington a major port, there have been shipping industries on that river from about 1790. And many of those industries would send us a beeswax, cotton, tobacco, all kinds of products to Great Britain, South America, France, you name it. And many freedom-seekers here could actually get on those ships with the help of abolitionists. So, here in Washington, when we talk about the Underground

Railroad we're not specifically talking about states in the North or Canada. We refer to the saltwater Underground Railroad; the Caribbean Islands that did not participate in slave trade. And because we would, for example, send pork products to the West Indies and the ships would return with maybe molasses, tropical fruit, and sugar. Working with abolitionists, if a freedom-seeker could get on those ships, you not only could go to states in the North and Canada, you could go to Florida. There was a town called St. Mose, named after Saint Teresa Mose. This thirteen edict of Spain allowed that land to be given to free blacks, and you could go there as well. You could go to Mexico; we traded with places in Mexico. So, you not only could go to states in the North and Canada, you could go south, you could go to Mexico, you could go to Cuba, you could also go to any of those countries that those merchants traded with. And working with abolitionists, they would sometimes be able to help you get on those ships.

There were many abolitionists that came down—let's just say from Philadelphia, Wilmington, Delaware, that would come here to get lumber, and many of those abolitionists would allow you to get on the ships. It was a carefully crafted network of people being able to do things not easily detected by “the eye”, as we say. It was a language that developed around that, that was—we called them Codes, and a Code could be food, it could be clothing, it could be songs, it could even be a nursery rhyme. But they all contained information that you needed to know about trying to get a ship or trying to get to your freedom. And many free blacks in Washington—if you were an enslaved person you would not go to live amongst the free blacks here in the city of Washington proper—first place they'd come to look for you. But there were many neighborhoods that were owned by all free blacks. The town of Aurora, which is about thirty miles from here, um, before the Civil War that was called Betty Town. That land was owned by all free blacks. A community about three miles from here, Keysville, was owned by all free blacks.

[01:00:00]

They were rural areas so with the help of abolitionists you'd be able to get out to those areas. But if you wanted to leave quickly and efficiently—because those were safer routes as opposed to over land routes—this river was the place you wanted to attempt to leave from.

Brooks: Wow. Are there any statistics available about how many folks were able to leave that way?

Jones: The statistics we have come from Philadelphia, from Dr. William Still himself. And that's about 3,000—I believe I'm saying this correctly—3,081 people, according to his records. Um, you have to remember, the Underground Railroad—nobody kept records, people didn't keep journals, they were dangerous things to have. People would know where you ended up and could come and get you. People didn't talk about it. If you were an abolitionist you did not want

people to know that you were harboring or helping a slave. So, when it comes to written documents they're really hard to come by. And a lot of our information comes from the um, the—what am I trying to say?—the abolitionists' records in Philadelphia. For example, Dr. William Still chronicles, in one of his journals, a freedom-seeker leaving—named Jacob Brown—leaving the Washington waterfront going to Canada. So, we rely on those records, not records that would have been kept here. They simply would not have existed.

Now, I have thousands of runaway slave ads that were put in papers, but we don't always know where they ended up. And we rely on the corroboration of stories. We use the Dr. Judith Wellman Scale—Dr. Judith Wellman is a historian, um, I believe she's with the University—I think I'm saying this right—Oswego, New York. She developed a scale from one to ten; a one: it just plain did not happen, a ten: strong, verifiable, documented sources, collaboration, primary sources. A lot of what we shared in the museum fits about a strong seven or eight. And when I say corroborated [??], it means that the story is not just told here in Washington, but you can go to other places all over the country. And you gotta remember, there was no Snapchat [both laugh], cell phones, Facebook, Twitter. That information was carried by way of mouth, and so we collaborate with --that's why I was telling you, when I go out to, let's just say, um, Santa Barbara, I'll check the history out there to see what it matches here. Because again, a lot of our information has to be corroborated [??]. I hear wonderful stories all the time, but I can't—I won't pass them on without strong corroboration [??]. Records about the Underground Railroad activity here in Washington, they just don't exist easy.

Brooks: And so how is the Underground Railroad Museum doing these days?

Jones: We're doing great. We've had visitors from every state in the country, and from—I think we're at, like, twenty-two countries now, because people actually come to the United States to do Underground Railroad tours. Or they, for example, we had a German watchmaker that came here in—I believe it was 1838. He brought his black apprentice with him. The apprentice was not an enslaved person, and that black apprentice stayed here, and they had a family, and they had a family, and they had a family. So, it's the whole Genesis thing; they just begat and begat and begat [Brooks laughs]. Well, um, his ancestors who live in Germany—they come to Washington to trace what he did here. So, we'll have a lot of people coming to Washington just to do Underground Railroad tours, and it's totally fascinating.

Brooks: And do you still do the walking tours?

Jones: Yes.

Brooks: And do you know—how much do you know about your own family and your own genealogy?

Jones: My own genealogy in my mother's family, the Kea, K-e-a—had never been enslaved. Uh, the Harrison—I grew up hearing stories about Moriah [sp ??], who would have been my fourth great-grandmother—she had been enslaved. She was a breeder of sorts, and I honestly did not know what a breeder was until I became an adult. I just thought when they talked about, Harrison was a breeder, that that was her last name. Like, Leesa is a Jones. But I later found out that a breeder was someone that had a lot of children for the slave owner. So, that I knew about, Moriah. The genesis of most of what I've done started because I found my grandmother's mother on a plantation in Bath.

[01:05:00]

The Washington Historical Society—in their literature they list six plantations. And when I tried to start finding information about the plantations that would have been around Washington—being that I found on a plantation so close by—within about two weeks' time I was literally up to sixty-eight plantations. And in no time, I was up to 143. And I'm thinking, Well, then, why does Washington Historical Society only list six? And so, that just now gave a whole new impetus and thrust to finding out, well, where did the rest of my family end up? And so, I've been able to trace the Kea family back to, I believe—I want to say this correctly—1678 in Ireland. Um, my mother's father's side of the family—I found them mostly in Bertie County.

Brooks: And do you share this love of history and curiosity with other people in your family?

Jones: Absolutely, absolutely. It's so important for our generations that are gonna come up after us to know who was who and not just know a name, but to know something about that person. So, we've compiled copious information in little booklets so that everybody can know who was who.

Brooks: Do you have any new projects in the wings?

Jones: The only new project I'm working on is a book that I was supposed to have finished, like three years ago. It's the African American history of Washington, North Carolina, and again it chronicles the history from about 1658 to 1950. And then, of course, after 1950, that'll be another volume. But I stopped that project to write a children's book because we go in a lot of schools with the history of the Underground Railroad, and I wanted to write a children's book. So, that's a project I'm currently finishing up.

Brooks: How's that going?

Jones: Excellent. It's ready to go to press.

Brooks: Oh, great. And you mentioned you have grandchildren.

Jones: I do. I have a grandson, Ricky, he lives in Seattle, Washington, he's married, and he just loves Seattle, Washington. His company sent him out there to live. I have a grandson that lives in, um, they just moved to Atlanta, Georgia. He's in the health field industry. And I have a grandson who just currently moved to West Orange, New Jersey with his dad after his mom died. But they're all doing well.

Brooks: Well, they broke the all-girl streak [laughs].

Jones: Absolutely, absolutely.

Brooks: They're just boys. That's great. So, I have a few questions that are kind of related to the, um, female leadership part of this discussion. And then a couple, like, wrap-up questions that—if there's anything else about your career that we haven't covered, feel free to jump in now or then. So, I kinda wanna talk about your experiences, if any, with kind of what we've gotten wrong in terms of gender equality—if you have any thoughts on kind of, maybe what we need to do better or what people—I guess, what we might have gotten wrong and need to work on.

Jones: I think what we've gotten wrong is the image that we have of women. That—and it's still prevalent to this day—that women should be the child bearers and child rearers, nurturers. Um, that the biggest part of our God-given talent is to raise healthy and well-defined families, and that that should be our first interest. And God forbid you decide you want to go in the military or you want to further your education and sacrifice the children by putting them in daycare or something. And so, I think those images have to change, and that for us to be strong role models and leaders, our young people, our families need to see every aspect of us. Not just one defined role that somebody thinks is a great idea for women to do because we honestly can do anything.

Brooks: And what, if any, challenges do you feel like you've faced as a woman that you might not have faced if you were a man?

**[01:09:50]**

Jones: Basically, what I just shared. Why would you want to put your children in daycare—because they were very young as I was finishing college—for someone else to raise? You should just stay home with them. And then when they're finished school, then you can further your education, then you can do all these things you would like to do for yourself. Fortunately for me, I've not been one to take that advice very well because I needed my daughters to see how I did things. So even though they were very young, I'd take them to college classes with me. I'd take them on history tours with me. I would take them—we would often go to our professors' houses to do different projects. I would actually take my daughters with me so they could see that college is not just a classroom, there's so much more involved.

So, I just kind of broke out of that mold, This is how you *should* do it. Because I would always look at people saying, This is how you *should* do it, and I'm going, Well, if this is how you *should* do it, I don't know that I necessarily see that coming—where's that adventurous streak? Where's that willingness to try something different? So, I haven't fit that mold very well.

Brooks: And especially as someone who's studied a lot of history in North Carolina and Washington history, what do you think—what's your understanding of the role of female leadership in North Carolina?

Jones: It's evolving. I still think old attitudes die hard and that there's still some pushback, and when I say pushback—I'm an ordained minister, and there's still the concept that women shouldn't preach. That's one of them. There's still the concept, Yes, it's great that you can do all these things, but why don't you go back into the teaching profession? That's safe. There's all this area around, Stick with what's safe; don't try anything because it's gonna be too hard for you. Or, This person hasn't done that before. And so, for the places that I've visited in North Carolina—we lived in Cary, right outside of Raleigh for quite a while—I don't care where you go, those attitudes still remain today. I think it's great when you choose what you want to do for yourself, and don't just become a teacher because a teacher is safe, or don't just become this because this is safe. If you want to go work for NASA, go work for NASA. But I think, um, a lot of that southern gentleness still doesn't permeate to some peoples' brains and it's still the same, Play it safe. I see that still a lot here.

Brooks: And what would you tell like a younger woman who's kind of having trouble just doing whatever they wanna do or, you know, finding their own path?

Jones: [laughs] I laugh because I think of the Nike commercial. "Just do it." I always tell people, "Don't let anyone put you in a box." There's a huge, wonderful world out here and if you let people define your thinking you're gonna miss out on a whole lot. So, when people tell me, I want to—I say, "Go for it, go for it!" When we came here, we had no idea we would be starting an Underground Railroad museum. We had no idea that this town would embrace us the way we did. We had people telling us, Nah, Washington is not going for that. But I told you, I'm not one to take no for an answer, not the first couple of noes anyway. But because you can always enlarge your territory you don't have to play it safe in that little box.

So, when we go to schools, one of the things that we always talk about the Underground Railroad is the courage that women had to abet their own freedom. They just didn't wait for somebody to come in and free them, they took matters in their own hands, and they educated themselves and they learned to do what it took to get ahead. And we're talking in a time when nobody had access to the things they have today. And so, if they taught their children different ways to be able to

read and write, if they taught their children, This is what you need to do to survive, these are the things you have to do to abet your own freedom, what lessons can we learn from them? Because those lessons are still here today—you just have to do it.

[01:15:00]

Brooks: And what is your definition of success?

Jones: My definition of success is being satisfied with yourself. That you've effected some kind of change to make life better for somebody else.

Brooks: And has that changed throughout your life, that definition?

Jones: No.

Brooks: That's great.

Jones: It still remains the same.

Brooks: And what, in your own words, is a notable woman?

Jones: Oh, my goodness.

Brooks: I know.

Jones: A woman that has a strong faith in whatever she believes can be done using her own mind and her own hands to effect the change. Um, a notable woman is someone who realizes they have an opportunity to leave footprints for someone else to follow, and the footprints that you leave are gonna help someone to get even further than what you've achieved. I think that's what a notable woman is. Having the courage to be able to see a big picture; have a vision and stay true to that vision, realizing that you're gonna impact other peoples' lives. I think about the Harriet Tubman movie I just recently went to see, I mean, I left the theater in tears. But that woman had a vision, and she stayed true to that vision, and all the adversity that came her way—never took her eyes off of that vision. So, to me, a notable woman is somebody that has a vision of greater things, attempts to pursue it, but are gonna leave footprints so even—she may only get so far, but she's left footprints; she's left a roadmap for someone to do even greater things. To me, that is a notable woman.

Brooks: That's great. That covers everything that I had to ask, is there anything you wanna add? Anything we didn't talk about?

Jones: Um, I think for me—I am totally overwhelmed that I would even be asked to participate because I've seen some of the women on the website and I look at



them with such great admiration and go, Wow, I really admire you. Where did you get the courage to do this? How did you—what genius did you have put before you to accomplish these things? And to know that somebody might somewhere down the road look at me and go, "How did you get the courage to do these things?" Um, I would like for that to probably be my epitaph; that I left this for somebody else to follow and do greater things. Because I look at some of these women and I go, There's no way I fit this category, there's no way. But I've realized that what started as a very small thing to help educate people and dispel the myths—because one thing about dispelling myths—for example, have you ever heard of the Hatfield and McCoy's?

Brooks: Yes.

Jones: They were these feuding families that—generation after generation after gen—they would shoot you as soon as look at you. But the feud started over a pig. One of their pigs got on the other person's property, they probably had a huge barbecue, the person owning the pig got upset. That's how the feud started. But if we don't dispel some of the myths about who we are as people and what we do and what our goals and aspirations are, which everybody has, you'll have generations of people growing up disliking and hating other people for something that they did not even do, or had no wherewithal to be a part of it. And so, what we do at Underground Railroad, we try to dispel those myths and we try to educate people. Because if all you ever hear is one side of the story, that does not help us at all. Even a pancake has two sides. And if you only see the side that's presented and you never know the other side, that does not help us grow as people. And so, for us, what we try to do is share the history of the Underground Railroad which is all kinds of people helping each other. Slavery—it was humanity at its worst.

[01:19:50]

I mean slavery did not start with the Civil War but it was humanity at its worst. But it was also humanity at its finest because people died helping people get to freedom. But if you don't know that story you'll only hear what's been perpetuated over time, and then one group of people will end up hating and disliking another group of people and they don't even know the truth. So, that's what we try to do at the Underground Railroad, and I believe that makes a difference.

Brooks: I think it does.

Jones: Thank you.

Brooks: That's so great. Alright, I'm gonna turn this off, if that's okay. Thanks, Leesa.

[01:20:29] [END OF INTERVIEW]

## Metadata

### Who:

Transcriber: Abigail Thompson

Transcript Reviewer: Ellen Brooks

Abstract Author: Abigail Thompson

Narrator's Maiden Name:

Others present during the interview, relationship to narrator: N/A

People mentioned during the interview:

**Dr. Norman Vincent Peale**, American minister and author of “The Power of Positive Thinking”; **Dr. William Still**, an African American abolitionist, conductor on the Underground Railroad, businessman, writer, historian, and civil rights activist based in Philadelphia; **Dr. Judith Wellman**, New-York based teacher, researcher, and historian specializing in women's history and the Underground Railroad; **George Washington**, general in the American Revolution, first president of the United States; **Saint Teresa de Aviles**, Spanish nun, patron saint of Fort Mose; **Harriet Tubman**, American abolitionist and political activist, known for her missions to lead enslaved people to freedom; the **Hatfields and McCoys**, families known for their infamous feud during the years following the Civil War.

Groups/Organizations/Institutions Mentioned (location):

Washington Colored Public School (Washington, NC); P.S. Jones High School (Washington, NC); Washington High School (Washington, NC); F.W. Woolworth's Company Store, “Woolworth's” (Washington, NC); Turnage Theater (Washington, NC); McLellan's Department Store (Washington, NC); The City University of New York (New York, NY); Marble Collegiate Church (New York, NY); Alliance of Black Social Workers (Philadelphia, PA); Philadelphia Community College (Philadelphia, PA); The Underground Railroad; Temple University (Philadelphia, PA); Cheyney State University of Pennsylvania (Cheyney, PA); WOR Radio (New York, NY); Cisco Systems, Inc.; Washington African American Walking History Tours (Washington, NC); Eastern Carolina University (Greenville, NC); University of North Carolina;

Duke University (Durham, NC); Brown Library (Washington, NC); State University of New York Oswego (Oswego, NY); Quaker schools; Montessori schools; NASA

Family members of the narrator: Isaac **last name?** (father), **unnamed** (mother), two unnamed older sisters, Lena (twin sister), unnamed younger sister, Sandra (daughter), Terri (daughter), Milton Jones (husband), Ricky (grandson), two unnamed grandsons.

Age of Narrator at the time of interview: 68

What:

Subjects Discussed: Segregated schools; public school integration; racial discrimination; private education; early childhood education; social work; public history; museums; African American history; the Underground Railroad; women's history.

When:

Date the interview transcript draft was completed: 4/7/2020

Date the interview review was completed: